

# The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program

## A Summary of Accomplishments 1998–1999

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### Abstract

*The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) is one of a suite of conservation provisions added to the amended 1985 Food Security Act in 1996. WHIP was developed to assist landowners with habitat restoration and management activities specifically targeting fish and wildlife, including threatened and endangered species. Within the framework of state, regional, and national habitat priorities, WHIP funds were allocated to states based on plans developed by state conservationists in consultation with their state technical committees. Special consideration was given to locally led initiatives with substantial outside funding and partnership participation. Of the \$50 million available for WHIP in 1998 or 1999, \$30 million was distributed to states for financial and technical assistance in 1998 and \$20 million in 1999. These distributions resulted in 4,600 projects affecting 672,000 acres in 1998 and 3,855 projects on 721,249 acres in 1999. WHIP projects averaged 146 (1998) or 187 (1999) acres in size and \$4,600 in cost-share. WHIP targeted a wide range of fish and wildlife species, from economically and culturally important species such as northern bobwhite quail and Atlantic salmon to threatened and endangered species such as Karner blue butterfly and Indiana bat. WHIP also provided cost-share for restoration of critical aquatic habitat such as cold water streams and rare terrestrial habitats in oak savanna, longleaf pine, prairie, and riparian ecosystems. WHIP was extremely popular with landowners and conservation partners because it targeted wildlife and addressed important management needs identified at the local level that were not eligible for cost-share under other USDA conservation programs.*

### Introduction

The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) is one of a suite of conservation provisions added to the amended 1985 Food Security Act in 1996. Administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), WHIP is a voluntary program that was established to improve wildlife habitat in our nation by providing financial and technical assistance to landowners wanting



Wisconsin stream restoration  
(W. Hohman)

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to develop upland, wetland, threatened and endangered species, fish and other types of wildlife habitat (Federal Register 1997). In this chapter, I further describe WHIP and summarize accomplishments for 1998 and 1999.

### **Program Priorities Were Established at the State Level**

Within the framework of regional and national habitat priorities, WHIP priorities were identified in plans developed by state conservationists in consultation with state technical committees comprised NRCS state staff, representatives from other government agencies and nongovernmental organizations, and landowners. Wildlife management needs identified by conservation groups before passage of the 1996 Farm Bill (e.g., Wildlife Management Institute publication, *How much is enough?*) also influenced the establishment of WHIP priorities (McKenzie and Riley 1995, National Audubon Society 1995). Flexibility in the establishment of WHIP priorities allowed states to address a wide assortment of wildlife needs across the United States and resulted in what appeared to be 51 independent programs. This diversity, however, is considered a strength of the program (Federal Register 1997, Burke 1999, Zinn 2000).

### **A Wide Range of Activities Were Initiated under WHIP**

WHIP priorities identified by the states were summarized somewhat differently by Burke (1999) and NRCS (1999). Burke (1999) summarized WHIP priorities in terms of three general categories: (1) rare, declining, threatened, or endangered species; (2) economic wildlife issues; and (3) native habitats (Burke 1999). These categories were not mutually exclusive. For instance, proposed work on a native plant communities in longleaf pine ecosystem also was recorded as applying to economically important and threatened and endangered species (e.g., northern bobwhite quail and red-cockaded woodpecker, respectively). Burke's (1999) breakdown of WHIP priorities indicated that state plans focused on restoration of native habitats with equal emphasis given to economic wildlife and threatened and endangered species (Table 1). NRCS (1999) grouped state WHIP priorities into upland wildlife, wetland wildlife, riparian and instream aquatic wildlife, and threatened and endangered species habitat categories. Nationwide, over 80% of state plans targeted upland wildlife habitats, especially grasslands (Table 1). Riparian areas also were emphasized in regions outside of the southeastern United States.

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### **WHIP Was Popular with Landowners and Conservation Partners**

Of the \$50 million available for WHIP in 1998 or 1999, \$30 million was distributed to states for financial and technical assistance in 1998 and \$20 million in 1999. This resulted in 4,600 projects affecting 672,000 acres in 1998 and 3,855 projects on 721,249 acres in 1999. WHIP projects averaged 146 (1998) or 187 (1999) acres in size and \$4,600 in cost-share. The \$10,000 limit on WHIP contracts challenged the states' ability to address ambitious

wildlife goals and tended to favor smaller projects. Nonetheless, the program's flexibility also allowed state conservationists to exceed the \$10,000/contract limit where justified. Thus, in spite of WHIP's ambitious goals and limited funding, states were successful identifying specific management issues and enlisting landowners' participation in addressing them (Burke 1999).

## Partnerships Contributed to Program Support and Efficiency

The diversity of projects initiated under WHIP required NRCS to forge new partnerships in addition to those that had been in place since the 1985 Food Security Act. These new partners helped to develop state priorities and provided additional resources and expertise. WHIP projects involved partnerships with local conservation districts; state wildlife, forestry, and water quality agencies; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; nongovernment organizations such as Ducks Unlimited, Quail Unlimited, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Pheasants Forever, Trout Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy, and Mississippi Fish and Wildlife Foundation; and many other groups (NRCS 1999). The Souadabscook stream restoration project in Maine was accomplished under WHIP and illustrates the program's nontraditional nature and cost efficiency (<http://www.WL.fb-net.org/whip/me-souad/Souadabscook.htm>).

WHIP partnerships also were evident in states that sought funding to establish educational programs. Such projects serve to inform the public about wildlife and the important role that farmers, ranchers, and other private landowners play in providing important habitat. Two examples are

- In North Dakota, a partnership between conservation districts, school districts, and the state wildlife agency to develop 25 outdoor wildlife learning sites (OWLS).
- In Mississippi, a cooperative project with the Choctaw Indians to create an outdoor learning center for school groups and the general public to increase awareness of the importance of wetland and upland habitats.

## Summary

The diversity of wildlife concerns in America's agricultural landscapes is evident in the different approaches adopted by states in their WHIP plans. States used WHIP to restore components of declining native plant communities, wetlands, riparian areas, aquatic habitat, and other wildlife habitat associated with agricultural landscapes. Work on the priority habitats had the potential to affect numerous terrestrial and aquatic species.



NRCS biologist and landowners at oak savannah restoration (W. Hohman)

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A review of the state-by-state priorities and the Program Accomplishments Reports highlights the wide breadth of species and native habitats considered by WHIP (NRCS 1999). Beneficiaries of WHIP include economically, culturally, and ecologically important fish and wildlife species (e.g., northern bobwhite quail, Atlantic salmon, Karner blue butterfly, and various species of bats) and rare native habitats in longleaf pine, prairie, and riparian ecosystems.

Many WHIP participants were primarily interested in managing their property for wildlife rather than incorporating wildlife management into agricultural operations. The strong emphasis on wildlife created controversy among traditional beneficiaries of USDA conservation programs who viewed working with owners of nonagricultural lands as “poaching” funds intended for wildlife habitat enhancement on agricultural lands. Burke (1999) reviewed this issue and concluded that whereas state plans addressed both situations, emphasis was given to improving wildlife habitats in agricultural landscapes.

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WHIP provided support for conservation activities not eligible under other USDA programs and therefore complemented other conservation programs. Wildlife is now recognized as an important component of other programs such as Conservation Reserve and Wetlands Reserve Programs. WHIP contributed to an increased awareness among conservation interests about the potential of USDA conservation programs for improving fish, wildlife, and native habitats in the United States (NRCS 1995).

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